

A School for Strategy

The Early Years

By JANET BRESLIN-SMITH

Washington was in a season of “transition and uncertainty.”¹ Emerging as the unmatched global power, supreme in military accomplishments and technological dominance, America was caught short by the emergence of a menacing adversary, one that did not mirror the characteristics of past opponents.

While there was little shared knowledge about the enemy, there was a unique determination among senior military and political leaders to study and carefully analyze the character and conduct of this threat. There was also a determination to consider grand strategy and assess the “inter-relationship of military and nonmilitary means in the promulgation of national policy” to meet this challenge.²

It was early spring 1946, and the Nation was relaxed in the postwar glow of victory and returning troops. It was a time



Vice Admiral Harry Hill, USN, first commandant of National War College

to anticipate peace and prosperity and savor the reward for years of sacrifice and loss. Yet by that same spring, some key military, diplomatic, and political officials had already come together to prepare a new generation of leaders to meet the next challenge to international stability and America’s position in the world.

General Dwight Eisenhower, Army Chief of Staff, Admiral Chester Nimitz, Chief of Naval Operations, James Forrestal, Secre-

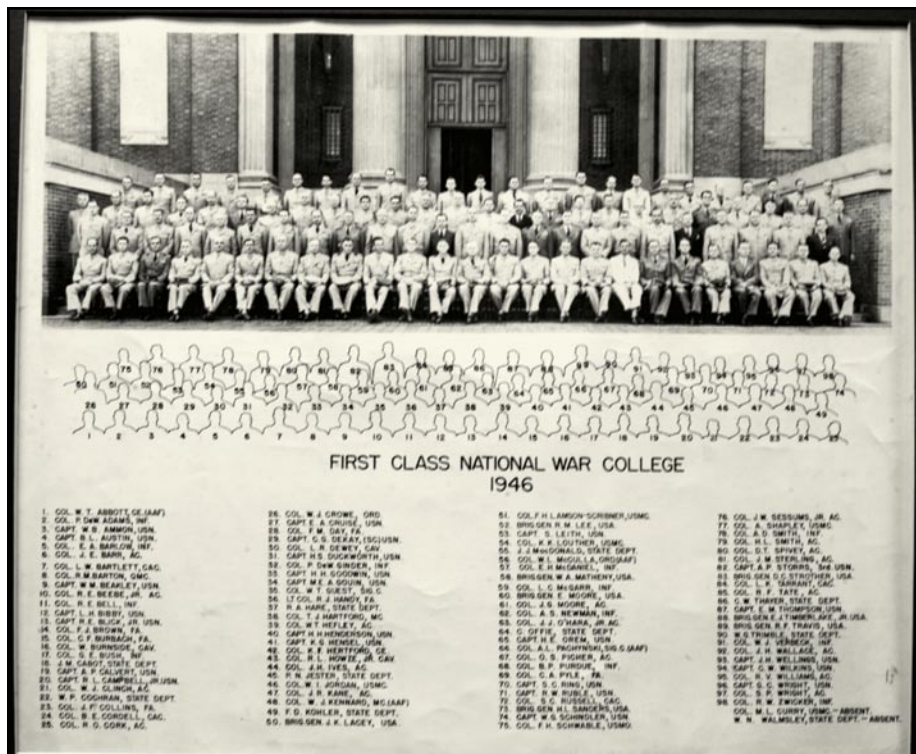
tary of the Navy, General Hap Arnold, and Vice Admiral Harry Hill had proposed the creation of a new senior-level college. This National War College would:

- prepare selected ground, air, and naval officers for the exercise of command and performance of joint staff duties in the highest echelons of the Armed Forces
- promote the development of understanding between high echelons of the Armed Forces and those other agencies of government which are an essential part of a national war effort.³

Building on the work of the Army and Navy Staff College, established in 1943, the new school would have a unique structure and mission. Both its faculty and student body would represent all Services and the Department of State. A tenth of the students would be assigned from State, and the Deputy Commandant would be a senior Foreign Service officer.

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Study would focus on strategic/political doctrine—the interplay of the military, economic, and political policies of a state. As the first Deputy Commandant for Foreign Affairs, George F. Kennan, noted, “It was the first time the United States Government had even prescribed this area of inquiry for study in an official academic institution.”⁷⁴ As the Secretaries of War and the Navy wrote to James Byrnes, Secretary of State, in 1946, “We both feel that the recent war has demonstrated a necessity for close coordination between the State Department and the Armed Forces. Accordingly, we have included in the curriculum, in addition to the military aspects of joint operations, a study of the integration of our foreign policy with the capabilities of our Armed Forces.”⁷⁵

As the National War College marks its 60th year, the commitment to this core mission distinguishes it from the maze of the national security institutions. The program developed in 1946 is remarkably respected today. Debate, openness to new ideas, and interagency and interservice interaction mark the vitality of the college. As the Nation faces a new global threat, a reflection on the creation and early years of the college is timely. In the War College tradition, it offers a lesson on the interplay of personality, institutions,

and bureaucratic politics. It is also a reminder of how government came together to educate and organize to meet a strategic challenge.

The Idea

Calls for “joint” professional military education began following World War I and intensified during World War II, when the most senior military leadership was seized with this need. General Hap Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, General George Marshall, Army Chief of

course study would focus on strategic/political doctrine—the interplay of the military, economic, and political policies of a state

Staff, and Fleet Admiral Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, were early architects of the idea. Initially, the Joint Chiefs established the Army-Navy Staff College in April 1943 to train selected officers for command and staff duty in unified or coordinated commands.

By 1944, the Joint Chiefs endorsed proposals for joint education at the highest levels to develop officers capable of formulating strategic concepts and commanding large-scale operations. These proposals came on the heels of the larger effort to rethink and restructure the institutions of national security. Both Congress and the executive branch

were reviewing suggestions to consolidate the Departments of War and Navy, create an independent air force, improve and centralize the intelligence function, and provide the President with a National Security Council.

Achieving institutional change in the form of government reform is a challenge that can weary the most courageous warrior. Studies can be done and recommendations can be received, but without strong leadership and agreement among critical players, the result is stillborn.

But the confluence of shared experience in World War II, the prospect of America's new role in the postwar world, a need to study strategy, and the importance of interservice coordination and international cooperation were acknowledged by key leaders. The power of these shared experiences and conclusions overcame conventional stumbling blocks to change.

The creation of the National War College required exquisite timing, personal leadership, and a delicate balance of institutional interests. The Army War College had been closed during the early years of the war, and plans for reopening were in limbo. Eisenhower agreed not only to suspend the college, but also to remove it from Fort McNair, take over the building, and use the appropriated funding for that school to establish the National War College. It was a remarkable feat in the rough political terrain of Washington power politics.

General Eisenhower and Admiral Nimitz were able to negotiate balancing arrangements to protect the interests of all

Services. The National War College was initially commanded by Navy flag officer, with Deputy Commandants representing the other services. The Armed Services Staff College, for mid-level officers, was located on the Naval Base in Norfolk, Virginia, while the War College was on an Army post.

But the concept behind the college went beyond teaming the Army and Navy training efforts. As stated earlier, the school was also to have the active participation of the State Department. There was an acknowledgment that, in Eisenhower's words, the military needed “a little training in diplomacy.” This was echoed by Vice Admiral Hill, the first Commandant, at the opening ceremonies in 1946: “Never before had the need for mutual understanding and teamwork between the

State Department and the Armed Forces been so necessary.”⁶

The Early Years

Planning for the structure and instructional content of the War College began in earnest by early 1946. The Joint Chiefs’ support was clear. The Commandant was to be a lieutenant general or vice admiral, serving a 3-year tour, with two deputies at the two-star level, representing all Services in the mix. The Deputy Commandant for Foreign Affairs would be a senior Foreign Service officer.

To reinforce the value of this joint command tour, many senior leaders at the college went on to distinguished careers within their home Services, achieving superior ranks, including Chief of Staff of the Army and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The student body selected for the first class was also remarkable. Almost 80 percent of the military students went on to earn flag rank. There were similar accomplishments for the civilians from the State Department and other agencies.

The National War College admitted its first class within 12 months of the conclusion of World War II. Its 100 students included 30 Army colonels, 24 Navy captains, 6 Marine colonels, and 30 Army Air Force students, of which 8 were general officers. Students had a wide range of backgrounds, from infantry officers, to Marine fighter pilots, to political officers in the Foreign Service. The youngest was 36 years old and the oldest was 48. The first class also included two observers from Great Britain and one from Canada.

From the outset, the intention was to enhance interservice and interagency exchange. Five years into this experiment, the annual report of the War College concluded that “the mixing of students from different departments and agencies, with their wealth of experience, results in an obvious growth in understanding, tolerance, and objective judgment.”⁷

Understanding the value of networking relationships, the architects of the War College organized a student experience that included seminar and committee study groups, social activities, and an active sports program. Students were rotated between committee and seminar groups and traveled together to domestic military bases and on overseas field studies. This emphasis remains,

and the intention is that each student would have some working relationship with every other student in each year’s class.

There was an active community of learning at Fort Lesley J. McNair. Seven members of the command team resided on post. The Commandant and deputies hosted frequent “at home” luncheons and dinners

almost 80 percent of the military students went on to earn flag rank

for faculty, students, and outside speakers. There were monthly dinner dances for the college leadership, faculty, and students. Beginning with the class of 1946, team sports and intercollege competition with the Industrial College of the Armed Forces became an important part of the War College experience.

The faculty has always mirrored the mission and nature of the school. Civilian and military instructors were selected for their ability to “lecture effectively, handle discussion groups and seminars, and supervise and direct research on all phases of power factors.”⁸

The faculty initially included 16 officers from all 4 Services, a number of Foreign Service officers, and 4 visiting professors from other universities and colleges. The first group of civilian academics included Professors Hardy Dillard of the University of Virginia, Bernard Brodie and Sherman Kent of Yale, and Walter Wright, Jr., of Princeton.

This was not to be a traditional research university; there would be no office hours and absent faculty engaged in off-campus study. The faculty would be practitioners and operators, as well as educators. The War College was not to be a setting for conventional instructor/student roles. As Vice Admiral Hill asserted in his opening address to the class in 1946:

*The college is a collection of men engaged in common pursuits. . . . It is not the intention that a group of men here with more knowledge will teach a group of men with less knowledge. Instead, it is our wish that all of us as a group will, by consultation and discussion, develop the best wisdom of the entire group.*⁹

If developing “the best wisdom,” thereby producing wise policymakers, was

the goal, the faculty had to be adept in the subtleties of adult professional education. If this was to be “a community of soldier/statesmen,” the faculty had to share the desire for the best wisdom.

Although hampered by the constant turnover of both military and civilian personnel, the college was able to provide faculty continuity by carrying over a number of visiting professors in the early years. The key to stability, however, was in the structure of the educational program and the content of the curricula.

The Curriculum

Admiral Hill began a process of outreach and consultation, sending a proposed curriculum to experts selected “because of their competence in the general field of education, their knowledge of world affairs, and their expressed interest in the betterment of understanding between the military and civilian world.” This group first provided advice on the college program and then was formed into the first Board of Consultants. The first year’s group included James Baxter, President of Williams College, Arnold Wolfers of Yale, Calvin Hoover of Duke, Walter Wright of Princeton, and William Langer of Harvard.

The board met yearly to review the total War College program and make recommendations to the Commandant. By 1955, it included the Chancellor of the University of California, the Presidents of Brown and Purdue, the Deputy Under Secretary of State, Bernard Brodie of RAND, and General Omar Bradley, USA.

The initial 10-month instruction was divided into 2 semesters. The fall term was designed to “increase knowledge on general matters of international political importance, [and] to examine problems of U.S. foreign policy and its making.”¹⁰ The second term program considered “military elements of national power as a means of attainment of United States policy objectives.”¹¹ Throughout the year, the class was confronted with a series of foreign policy or military problems. Working on those strategic dilemmas culminated with a consideration “of the general problem of security of the United States and the nature of a future war.”

In the first year, the War College offered the following courses: Security in the Atomic Age, Basic Economics and Domestic Politics, Basic Factors in International Relations, Objectives and Capabilities of the Principal



President Harry S Truman presented diplomas to the NWC Class of 1949

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Powers, Strategic Area Studies, Strategy Analysis, Strategic Concept of Operations, Science and the Armed Forces, the National Military Establishment, and Future War and the Security of the United States. No matter what the course mix, “the school’s academic program has always centered on a core curriculum taken by all students. National security strategy provided the organizing principle of the core, though the components of that study have varied.”¹²

Methods of Instruction

Although outside lecturers dominated the early program, work in seminars and committees had the most lasting impact. By the end of the 1940s, the Commandant concluded:

First, the outstanding quality of the student body demands an unusual technique, affording

*the students an opportunity to develop themselves rather than providing a predetermined and predigested course of instruction. Second, the nature of the studies, being of current matters very much alive and subject to change, requires a flexibility and adaptability in course planning which precludes long-range academic establishment of course schedules and coverage and further requires the utmost alertness on the part of the permanent staff and faculty.*¹³

As the mix of lecture, readings, exercises, and seminars evolved, there was constant concern with student development: “The basic philosophy of the National War College has always been to increase students’ capacity to think broadly, conceptually, analytically, and critically as they involve themselves in the grand strategy and the United States national security policy—its formulation and implementation.”¹⁴

Indeed, there was electricity in the air during that first year at the War College. George Kennan describes a period of experimentation and intellectual engagement: “Senior officials from both the military and civilian echelons of the Government as well as people from the legislative branch attended our lectures and occasionally lectured themselves.”¹⁵ He noted that the Secretary of the Navy and, later, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal regularly sat in, and even President Harry Truman attended a lecture on the Soviet Union. “The college came to provide a sort of academic seminar for the higher echelons of governmental Washington generally,” recalled Kennan.

To maintain candor and intellectual rigor, the college cultivated a unique professional climate. The leadership wrote in 1954, “This institution has always taken great pride in the fact that it has no ‘party line’ and will

not tolerate doctrinaire approaches in the analysis of any subject. Every aspect of the program is not only conducive to freedom of thought and uninhibited expression, but has also been intentionally planned to furnish a forum for the dissemination and evaluation of new ideas.” To maintain this climate, the college initially classified all lectures, discussions, and written exercises. With confidentiality protected, “there is every encouragement for candid, straightforward, ‘let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may’ approaches, even as regards the most sensitive problems, and which may be of great current concern in government.”¹⁶ As the years progressed, the classification policy was relaxed and confidentiality was protected by a rigorous nonattribution policy. The spark of debate in seminars has remained.

The achievements of these early classes could be measured in many ways. There were intense policy exchanges between the college and policymakers, and the work of the committees was sought out by officials at the new Department of Defense. Students went on to leadership roles in the diplomatic and military communities with a shared background and appreciation of each others’ professional experience. Many came back to the War College to lecture or join the faculty.

Moreover, those first years of the War College brought new approaches to the concept of national security strategy. As George Kennan explained in his memoirs, the advent of new technology, especially atomic weaponry, called for rethinking the traditional American concepts of total war and unconditional capitulation. In his analysis, the application of these concepts, “while successful in the immediate military sense, had complicated—very gravely indeed—the problems of peace.”¹⁷

Kennan’s own assessment of the strategic challenge the Soviet Union presented in this new atomic age required students to consider “the fact that Russia was simply not occupiable,” that technology had changed the strategic environment, and that “if weapons were to be used at all, they would have to be employed to temper the ambitions of an adversary, or to make good limited objectives against his will—not to destroy his power, or his government, or to disarm him entirely.”¹⁸ He concluded that “man would have to recognize, in short, that the device of military coercion could have, in the future, only a relative—never an absolute—value in the pursuit of political objectives.”¹⁹

Thus there was a need to study “the ambitions of the adversary,” understand the enemy, and consider the mix of military and political instruments of state that national objectives called for. Kennan embraced the War College course on strategic/political doctrine and savored the teaching experience. He described the students as “mature, thoughtful, keen . . . they were a joy to teach. One learned from them as one taught.”²⁰ This sentiment would be echoed by today’s faculty, engaged with students coming from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, diplomatic posts around the world, and Washington bureaucratic contests.

In this 60th year of the National War College, the Nation again is challenged to develop a strategy for our day. Although the intimacy of late 1940s Washington is gone—the days of extended luncheons debating policy and Cabinet Secretaries sitting with students in lectures—the vision for the War College could be described today as it was by the Board of Consultants in 1951:

*The College remains what it has been from the outset—a broad-gauge institution, wide open to different and often conflicting viewpoints, and dedicated to the training of officers in the cooperative work so essential to the National Security.*²¹ **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), 306.

² *Ibid.*, 307.

³ The National War College, *Annual Report 1946–1947*, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC, 1.

⁴ Kennan, 308. Kennan went on,

we had . . . virtually nothing in the way of an established or traditional American doctrine we could take as a point of departure for our thinking and teaching. It was the mark of the weakness of all previous American thinking about international affairs that there was almost nothing in American political literature of the past one hundred years on the subject of the relationship of war to politics.

⁵ Joint letter from Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy to James Byrnes, Secretary of State, January 26, 1946, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC.

⁶ Vice Admiral Harry W. Hill, opening address to first class, National War College, September 3, 1946, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC.

⁷ The National War College, *Annual Report 1951–1952*, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC, 16.

⁸ The National War College, *Annual Report 1946–1947*, 4.

⁹ Hill.

¹⁰ George J. Stansfield, *History of the National War College 1946–1956*, unpublished manuscript, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Tom Keaney, *The National War College*, unpublished manuscript, 1997, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC.

¹³ The National War College, *Annual Report 1949–1950*, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁴ James Keagle, “A Summary of Major Activities and Their Evolution, Academic Year 1946–1947 through Academic Year 1989–1990,” unpublished manuscript, 1989, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC, 2.

¹⁵ Kennan, 306.

¹⁶ The National War College report to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, December 15, 1954, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC, 7.

¹⁷ Kennan, 310.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Kennan goes on, “To occupy [Russia] exceeded our physical possibilities, even on the most optimistic estimate. And it exceeded our political and moral possibilities as well. We were not set up to govern, even temporarily, great numbers of people in other parts of the world.”

¹⁹ Kennan, 310.

²⁰ Kennan, 307.

²¹ The National War College, *Annual Report 1951–1952*.

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